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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/203 A of 18 December 1998, in which the Assembly requested me to report to it at its fifty-fourth session on the progress made in the implementation of that resolution. In the same resolution, the General Assembly also requested me to report every three months during its fifty-third session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). Three progress reports have been submitted: the first on 31 March 1999 (A/53/889-S/1999/362), the second on 21 June 1999 (A/53/1002-S/1999/698) and the third on 21 September 1999 (A/54/378-S/1999/994).

2. The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of the last annual report on 23 November 1998 (A/53/695-S/1998/1109), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan. The report describes the principal events that have taken place in Afghanistan, including the major military and political developments in Afghanistan as well as the activities of the Special Mission and the missions of Lakhdar Brahimi, who continued to serve as my Special Envoy during the period under review. In conjunction with the Department of Political Affairs, my Special Envoy oversaw and guided the activities of the Special Mission, including coordination and cooperation in humanitarian and other United Nations activities in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Military situation

3. Fighting between the Taliban and the United Front (UF) has ebbed and flowed during the period under review without resulting in significant change to the territory held by either party. After a further massive loss of human lives, increased suffering of the civilian population and immense physical destruction, the two sides found themselves roughly at the same positions they held in late 1998.

4. The level of fighting reached an unprecedented scale for 1999 when the Taliban launched a major ground and air offensive against UF on 28 July. The offensive, which Taliban leaders called a decisive battle to defeat UF, not only shattered the hopes for peace raised at the Tashkent meeting of the "Six plus Two" group, but also added further problems to the already grave humanitarian and human rights situations on the ground. The political, humanitarian and human rights implications of the offensive will be further described in the present report.

5. In addition to the existing troops, the Taliban offensive was believed to have been reinforced by between 2,000 and 5,000 new recruits, mostly emanating from religious schools within Pakistan, many of them non-Afghans, and some below the age of 14, who had apparently crossed the borders to join the civil war in Afghanistan. The Taliban offensive was successful at the initial stage, leading to the quick capture of most of the Shomali Plains, north of Kabul, up to the entrance of the Panjsher Valley, as well as areas close to the Amu Darya (Oxus) river. However, on 5 August, UF forces counter-attacked and retook virtually all the territory lost to the Taliban in the previous week.

6. On 11 August, the Taliban regrouped and launched a new attack from the front line north of Kabul, advancing cautiously and securing the terrain through the forced displacement of the civilian population and the destruction of houses and the agricultural infrastructure. The Taliban established a new front line some 50 kilometres north of Kabul, running from the "old Kabul road" north of Qarah Bagh, traversing Bagram airbase and the Kohi Safi Mountains, to a point in the vicinity of Nijrab. The United Front meanwhile opened new areas of conflict, in an effort to reduce pressure on their forces and draw away some of the Taliban's superior numerical strength, during which UF made some minor territorial gains, mainly in the south-eastern region.

7. On 24 August, a large truck-bomb exploded outside the residential compound of the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, in Kandahar. The bomb, apparently designed to kill him, claimed at least 10 lives, including some of his close relatives. No culprits are known to have been arrested to date nor has a claim of responsibility been made.

8. In September the Taliban stepped up their pressure on UF positions in northern Afghanistan, north of Kunduz city and to the east of Khanabad town in Takhar Province. For their part, UF kept up their diversionary attacks in the north-west and the south-east of the country. On 25 September, the Taliban launched a major offensive in northern Kunduz Province, close to the border with

Tajikistan. They succeeded in recapturing the Amu Darya (Oxus) river-port of Sher Khan Bandar and the nearby districts of Imam Sahib and Dasht-e-Archi, which they had lost in the UF counter-attack of 5 August. The Taliban pushed through Bangi, east of Khanabad town, and threatened to take Taloqan, capital of Takhar Province and one of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud's main command and control centres. The Taliban air force intensified its aerial bombing of Taloqan, causing a considerable number of civilian casualties, damage to property and a population exodus.

9. By late October, however, UF had once again driven the Taliban back to their starting positions. Intermittent fighting has continued in the west in Herat, Ghor and Farah Provinces. In early November, UF claimed that its forces had made further advances in northern provinces of Samangan and Sar-e-Pul.

B. Political situation

Intra-Afghan talks in Ashkabad

10. Following discreet efforts in late January and early February by the Special Mission and certain neighbouring countries to persuade the two Afghan warring sides to meet, an initial meeting of Taliban and UF representatives took place in Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, on 10 and 11 February 1999. To encourage a free exchange of views on a range of substantive issues, the talks were held without a fixed agenda or publicity. The two sides agreed in principle that there should be a further round of talks leading to agreement on a ceasefire, prisoner exchange and future government.

11. This second round of intra-Afghan talks took place from 11 to 14 March in Ashkabad, again under the auspices of the United Nations. At the end of the three-day meeting, both sides reached a framework agreement to, in principle, form a shared executive, a shared legislature and a shared judiciary. They also agreed to continue the talks, after the religious holiday of Eid Al-Adha, preferably inside Afghanistan, with a view to addressing other issues and implementing the decisions reached in this second round of talks.

12. However, shortly after the conclusion of the "Ashkabad II" talks, the two sides lapsed into mutual recriminations and, on 10 April, Mullah Omar issued a statement indicating that the Taliban were suspending their talks with the opposition. The Taliban made clear that the talks could only be resumed if UF accepted to join and work within the system of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This remained unacceptable to the Rabbani administration who said they could not accept the Emirate system since the Taliban possessed no popular or legal mandate to govern or to impose an emirate system. The Secretary-General issued a statement on 12 April, deeply regretting the Taliban's decision and calling on those concerned to explore the scope for agreement on confidence-building measures to contain the level of fighting.

13. Diplomatic efforts were made to revive the Ashkabad process, but to no avail. On 19 April, the President of the Security Council, in a statement to the press, urged the two sides to resume talks. Pakistan and the Russian Federation also released a joint statement along similar lines during the visit

of the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, to Moscow in April. The United States of America, for its part, urged Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran to use their influence to restart the talks.

14. Since the collapse of the Ashkabad talks, there has been no change in the Taliban's decision to suspend talks, despite the repeated efforts of the Special Mission and others to persuade them otherwise. However, UNSMA has sought to promote confidence between the two parties through a range of measures covering military, political and humanitarian aspects. A proposal to appoint military liaison officers from both sides and to establish an embryonic conflict-resolution centre was presented to both sides but did not bear fruit. Ideas to bring the two sides together in political dialogue also came to nothing. Only in the humanitarian dimension were some modest results achieved, with a limited number of exchanges of prisoners, but well short of the comprehensive exchange which the United Nations had sought.

15. In late June, Professor Rabbani expressed to UNSMA his desire to meet Mullah Omar, preferably in a location outside Afghanistan and under the auspices of the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) or the "Six plus Two" group. UNSMA relayed this message to the Taliban leadership but the idea was not pursued further by either party.

"Six plus Two" meeting in Tashkent

16. At the invitation of the Government of Uzbekistan, the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the members of the "Six plus Two" group met in Tashkent on 19 and 20 July 1999. Mr. Brahimi participated in the meeting on my behalf. The two Afghan sides were also invited as observers and met each other for the first time since Ashkabad II.

17. The meeting adopted the "Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan" (A/54/174-S/1999/812). In the Declaration, the members of the group reiterated their commitment to a peaceful political settlement of the Afghan conflict and called for the resumption of peace talks between the Taliban and UF. Significantly, the members of the group, for the first time, publicly committed themselves not to provide military support to any Afghan party and to prevent the use of their respective territories for such purposes. The group, as well as Mr. Brahimi, made strong appeals to both Afghan sides to refrain from initiating any major new military offensives.

Pakistani peace initiative

18. On 18 August 1999, the Government of Pakistan announced that it was undertaking an initiative, in response to an appeal by Professor Rabbani to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, to facilitate reconciliation between the two Afghan parties. A delegation of the Government of Pakistan met a UF delegation in Dushanbe on 18 August and subsequently met with Mullah Omar in Kandahar before returning again to Dushanbe for talks with UF on 22 and 23 August. On 14 September, Pakistan held a second round of talks with UF and the Taliban. The Pakistani delegation met with Professor Rabbani in Dushanbe and with Mullah

Omar's close advisers, Mullah Abdul Jalil Akhond and Mullah Wakil Ahmad, in Kandahar on 16 September.

19. The United Front publicly rejected any attempt at mediation by Pakistan on the stated grounds that Pakistan's military and political support for the Taliban prevented it from acting as an honest broker. The Taliban leadership made no public statement about the Pakistani initiative but indicated that it would consider the proposals.

Action by the United States of America against the Taliban

20. On 5 July 1999, the United States of America imposed unilateral financial and economic sanctions against the Taliban. These measures, which United States officials underlined were not designed to harm the people of Afghanistan, are to remain in place until Osama bin Laden, who is wanted by the United States to face charges of acts of terrorism, is expelled or extradited from Afghanistan. In August, the United States froze the assets of the Afghan national airline, Ariana, held in United States banks. In September, India announced the termination of the airlink between Amritsar and Kabul, leaving Ariana with only one destination outside Afghanistan, Dubai.

21. In late August, the Taliban Chief Justice announced that the Taliban had closed the case against Osama bin Laden for lack of evidence. The Taliban reiterated that Mr. bin Laden remained a guest of the Afghan people and was prevented by the Taliban from acting on Afghan soil against any country.

Security Council sanctions against the Taliban

22. On 15 October 1999 the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1267 (1999), imposing sanctions on the Taliban unless the latter turned Mr. bin Laden over within 30 days of its adoption. Although the Taliban made some attempts to resolve the question after the adoption of the resolution, there is no indication at the time of the writing of the present report that they are prepared to comply with the Council's demand contained in paragraph 2 of the resolution. The Taliban reiterated that Mr. bin Laden remained a guest of the Afghan people and could not be forced to leave the country unless he volunteered to do so.

Peace initiatives by non-belligerent Afghan groups

23. On 29 April, the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, announced an initiative whereby a group of 30 Afghan political figures would meet in Rome to prepare for the convening of a Loya Jirgah (grand assembly). The Taliban publicly rejected this initiative, stating that the former King had lost the people's trust. The King's initiative, on the other hand, was welcomed by a broad range of Afghan groups, including UF, as well as by certain member States, such as the United States. An initial preparatory meeting took place on 25 June. The Taliban, although invited, did not attend. The group decided to form a preparatory council to develop the initiative and to launch a campaign within the region to explain the initiative and rally support for it. The organizers of the Loya Jirgah initiative are planning a further preparatory meeting in Rome in late November.

24. There have been other meetings convened by non-belligerent Afghan political groups in locations outside Afghanistan to seek a solution to Afghanistan's problems. In the main, however, these meetings have not been interrelated nor accepted by the belligerents inside Afghanistan. Prominent Afghan figures involved in these peace efforts have been targeted by their opponents. Family members of the former mujahideen commander, Abdul Haq, were killed in cold blood in January in Peshawar. In July, Abdul Karzai, once a deputy speaker of the Senate and a supporter of the ex-King, was gunned down in Quetta, only days after he arrived from the United States. In August, former President Sibghatullah Mojadeddi left Pakistan in fear of his life. The United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan has sought the continued protection by the Pakistan authorities of all Afghans residing in Pakistan.

Changes within the United Front and the Taliban

25. Before the peace talks in Ashkabad, UF consolidated the anti-Taliban forces, politically and militarily, under a single, unified command. A 40-member Leadership Council, headed by Professor Rabbani, and a separate Supreme Military Council were established. The United Front also announced its intention to form a 150-member assembly or shura in non-Taliban areas. Shortly before the opening of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly, UF announced the formation of a 10-member Political Committee, as well as a ministerial cabinet reshuffle aimed, it said, at giving a broader representation from Afghanistan's four major ethnic groups, namely the Pashtoon, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek communities.

26. In a major reshuffle of the Taliban administration, Mullah Omar, on 27 October, appointed new foreign, interior and information ministers and replaced most of the governors and corps commanders. The Taliban announced that the objective of these changes was to improve efficiency and discipline. Mullah Omar's close aide, Mullah Wakil Ahmed, was made the new Taliban Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Taliban relations with neighbouring States

27. The Taliban continued to seek improved relations with certain regional States. Taliban senior representatives paid visits to Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to meeting with representatives of the "Six plus Two" group attending the Tashkent meeting. Delegations from a wide range of countries, including China, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Russian Federation, also had contacts with the Taliban either in Islamabad or in Afghanistan. However, since the start of the Taliban offensive in July, such visits have become less frequent.

28. On 2 February, senior representatives of the Taliban and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran met in Dubai. It was the first high-level political meeting between the two neighbouring countries since the killing of Iranian diplomats and a journalist at the Iranian Consulate-General in the northern Afghan town of Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998. The Taliban were represented by Mullah Wakil Ahmad and the Islamic Republic of Iran by Ambassador Taherian. The way for the meeting was paved by the Taliban's prior decision to

return Iranian trucks impounded by the Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998. It is regrettable, however, that the Dubai meeting failed to satisfy the demand of the Islamic Republic of Iran that the Taliban investigate more thoroughly and bring to trial the killers of their officials in Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban have since then reaffirmed the continuation of their investigation of the case.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY

29. During the reporting period, my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, undertook three missions to the region, including two to Afghanistan. In December 1998, he went to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for consultations with leaders of the respective Governments and others. In February and March 1999, in addition to Afghanistan, he visited Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. He met with the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, in Kandahar, and went to Kabul twice for talks with the Taliban leadership there. He also had two meetings with Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, in Dushanbe and Taloqan.

30. During his first two missions, my Special Envoy urged the parties to settle their differences by peaceful means and, to that end, to resume the intra-Afghan talks started in Ashkabad. He suggested to the parties that, in order to facilitate the resumption of talks, the parties pursue a wide range of confidence-building measures, including agreement on a permanent ceasefire, the exchange prisoners of war and the appointment of military liaison officers. Mr. Brahimi also repeatedly underlined the importance for the neighbours of Afghanistan, in particular the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, to discuss their concerns in a more candid and serious way.

31. In July, Mr. Brahimi visited the region for the third time to represent the United Nations at the Tashkent meeting of the "Six plus Two" group and to visit Kabul and Islamabad. He repeated his proposals for confidence-building measures while speaking to the Taliban and UF delegations in Tashkent. He also helped bring the two sides together for a private meeting.

32. In Tashkent and at his subsequent meetings in Kabul in July, my Special Envoy made a strong appeal to Taliban leaders, including Mullah Mohammad Rabbani in Kabul, not to launch a military campaign, in keeping with the spirit of the Tashkent Declaration. During the talks with Mullah Rabbani on 22 July, Mr. Brahimi warned that the Taliban should realize that if it indeed launched an offensive, it would be extremely costly to the Afghan people and would very negatively affect the efforts of the United Nations and the international community to broker peace. The point was made that in a multi-ethnic country like Afghanistan, peace could only be achieved through reconciliation among its people and with its neighbours. The conquest of territories, however extensive, would never succeed in bringing about a lasting peace.

33. However, Mullah Rabbani did not give a clear answer to my Special Envoy's plea and reiterated that, in the light of past experience, it was difficult for the Taliban to trust UF. Mr. Brahimi also drew Mullah Rabbani's attention to the potential danger to the aid community in Kabul posed by the hostile attitude

of non-Afghan youths who had been arriving from Pakistan in alarmingly large numbers.

34. Upon his return to Islamabad on 25 July, my Special Envoy continued his last-minute attempt to avert the Taliban offensive, which by then appeared imminent. He pleaded once again with political, military and other leaders in Islamabad to exert their influence on the Taliban. Sadly, these calls were not heeded and the offensive began in the early hours of 28 July. It seems obvious that the Taliban's action in launching a major new offensive against UF in the Shomali Plains, coming in the wake of the Tashkent meeting, was not coincidental. It should also be noted that no serious, sustained efforts were made by those with influence to dissuade the Taliban leaders from launching such an offensive.

35. During his regional travels, my Special Envoy pleaded with host Governments for a positive and constructive engagement of Afghanistan's neighbouring States. He suggested that this be pursued vigorously through the mechanism of the "Six plus Two" group, with the twin aim of encouraging the Afghan parties to negotiate a peaceful settlement and to call a halt to their fighting. He expressed disappointment at the continuous influx into Afghanistan of war matériel and thousands of non-Afghan fighters from neighbouring countries. He made clear that this trend ran contrary to the stated wishes of the neighbouring States that they wished the Afghans to resolve their own problems without outside interference. My Special Envoy briefed the Security Council on his activities on 18 October.

IV. ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL MISSION TO AFGHANISTAN

36. Throughout the year, UNSMA has performed the three essential roles encompassed by its mandate: (a) to support my Special Envoy in promoting peace through contact with the two Afghan warring sides as well as through the wider Afghan political and civil community; (b) to monitor and report political and military developments in Afghanistan; and (c) to coordinate activities with the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Activities (UNOCHA) as well as the indigenous and international humanitarian assistance community.

37. The mediation efforts of the Special Mission gathered pace in early 1999 following some fruitful discussions between the Mission and the leadership of both sides. These discussions contributed greatly to the two rounds of talks between senior Taliban and UF representatives in Ashkabad. Despite the subsequent decision by the Taliban not to continue these talks, the Mission nevertheless sought to rebuild mutual confidence between the two sides, as described in the preceding paragraphs.

38. The Special Mission has worked hard to reach out to the wider Afghan and international spectrum, however, owing mainly to the lack of unity among non-belligerent Afghan groups, viable political movements have yet to emerge.

39. The preparations for the Civil Affairs Unit within UNSMA are well advanced. An UNSMA-led assessment mission in late April/early May received the agreement

of both Afghan sides to the Unit's operation inside Afghanistan. The recruitment of the Unit's initial personnel began in early summer and the successful applicants are expected to take up their posts before the end of the year for deployment starting early 2000.

40. UNSMA's political and military monitoring role has been heavily circumscribed by the lack of security and the lack of cooperation within the Taliban military establishment. Nevertheless, since March 1999, UNSMA has maintained a rotational presence of a military officer in Kabul and a pattern of visits by political officers to different locations elsewhere in Afghanistan.

V. HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES

41. The increased humanitarian needs arising from the intensification of the conflict in Afghanistan, particularly in the second half of 1999, have confirmed the importance of the humanitarian operations of the United Nations agencies and its partners in the assistance community in providing a minimum safety net for the most vulnerable.

42. Assistance, along with peacemaking and human rights, constitutes one of the "three pillars" of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan. The development of a common programme of assistance, as presented in the 1999 Consolidated Appeal for Afghanistan, represented a significant step forward, not just for the agencies of the United Nations, but for the assistance community as a whole, towards the achievement of greater coherence and effectiveness. Building on the principles and objectives laid out in the Strategic Framework, the assistance community presented, in the 1999 Consolidated Appeal, an integrated programme of assistance that took account of the constraints and opportunities that are faced in Afghanistan.

43. A comprehensive process of discussion and dialogue has been maintained between all stakeholders throughout the year. This process has been facilitated by the Office of the United Nations Coordinator within Afghanistan, through the regional coordinating offices, as well as in Islamabad. The Afghanistan Programming Body, which brings together representatives from the United Nations, the non-governmental organization (NGO) and donor communities, has provided a forum for policy discussions and consensus-building on the direction of humanitarian activities. The programme also benefits from biannual high-level policy discussions among the members of the Afghanistan Support Group of donors.

44. The temporary relocation of international staff from Afghanistan to Pakistan from August 1988 to March 1999 restricted the ability of United Nations agencies to deliver humanitarian assistance. Although operations continued with admirable support of Afghan national staff, the absence of international staff reduced the capacity of the agencies to engage in dialogue with authorities and to advocate for emergency assistance needs with any credibility. The return of international staff, initially on a rotational basis, has helped the momentum of assistance provision to pick up during the year. Most assistance activities have continued, seemingly unaffected by the absence of formal negotiations with the Taliban authorities. Formal discussions in the Joint Consultative Committee started in October and are ongoing.

45. In addition to the security and access constraints arising from the conflict, the humanitarian programme has been subject to a number of operational constraints that have hampered effective delivery of assistance. Despite the concerted efforts of the assistance community and the donor community to collectively determine programme priorities, funding against the Consolidated Appeal remains uneven. The lack of timely receipts for key operational support components such as aircraft operations and security, which enable access for humanitarian agencies to field locations within Afghanistan, has restricted the implementation of programmes and projects.

46. Access to affected populations has been a significant concern throughout the year. In addition to the physical problems of reaching affected populations caused by inhospitable terrain and poor infrastructure, political and military considerations of the warring parties have also hampered humanitarian operations. Combatants have denied humanitarian agencies effective access to many areas, including parts of northern Kabul, Parwan and Kapisa Provinces, as well as to districts in central Afghanistan. Fighting and insecurity continue to prevent access to many parts of the north.

47. During 1999, the humanitarian response capacity of the United Nations agencies has been called on to respond to both man-made and natural disasters. On 11 February, an earthquake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale struck Wardak and Logar Provinces, affecting some 16,000 families in several districts. The International Committee of the Red Cross, supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the American Red Cross Society, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Norwegian Church Aid coordinated health activities. United Nations agencies, the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) and non-governmental organizations provided food, shelter and assistance to the affected population.

48. Several waves of armed conflict have swept across the region of Hazarajat in the central highlands. The conflict that began in March affected the districts of Bamyan, Shiber and Yakaolang and displaced over 20,000 people. Although many of those initially displaced have since returned, ongoing conflict has continued to worsen the plight of civilians. Currently the United Nations is providing assistance for over 30,000 vulnerable households, in particular those whose houses have been deliberately destroyed.

49. Of particular concern has been the level of food security for those affected. Over the course of 1999, as part of an integrated programme in which key United Nations and NGO partners are participating, the World Food Programme (WFP) has provided emergency food in the districts of the central highlands and Badakshan. More than 14,000 metric tons of food has been distributed to over 350,000 people.

50. Since August, intense fighting in the Shomali Plains north of Kabul has caused the displacement, in some cases forced, of hundreds of thousands of people. The United Nations estimates that there are currently 65,000 displaced people in the Panjsher Valley. Information gathered in the valley indicates that approximately 50,000 displaced people, including the most vulnerable people amongst the host population, are in need of food aid.

51. According to an emergency food needs assessment carried out in the valley by WFP, it is estimated that at least 6,000 metric tons of food aid will need to be provided over the next eight months, up to April 2000, in order to meet food needs. WFP plans to deliver up to 2,500 metric tons of food to the valley by the time the roads are closed by snow towards the end of November. The health and shelter needs of those displaced are also being supported.

52. A further 60,000 people are in Kabul following forced displacement from the Shomali Plains, where widespread burning of crops and destruction of homes has occurred. Since August, WFP and several NGOs have been providing food assistance for approximately 12,000 people (almost 90 per cent of them women and children) currently housed in the ex-Soviet Embassy compound. The International Committee of the Red Cross is providing food and non-food packages for internally displaced persons in other parts of the city.

53. Between 1 January and 30 September, a total of 82,000 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran with assistance from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and WFP. The majority of these refugees returned to rural districts in Afghanistan that are relatively stable and secure.

54. During the same period, some 70,000 Afghans were forcibly returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran, the majority through the border in Nimroz Province. UNHCR is currently negotiating a plan of action with the Islamic Republic of Iran for the orderly and voluntary return of refugees. The agreement, once concluded, would also significantly reduce forced deportation from the Islamic Republic of Iran and contribute to increased protection for those who are unable or unwilling to return.

55. Initial reintegration assistance has been provided on a continual basis throughout 1999. This has included the provision of transport, individual household support, potable water and emergency shelter reconstruction, in addition to programmes of education, health and income generation. This support has specifically targeted women and other vulnerable segments of the returnee population.

56. The United Nations specialized agencies have conducted priority health activities throughout the year, including the Expanded Programme of Immunization, human resource development, integrated disease control activities, safe motherhood and water and sanitation programmes. WHO has carried out malaria and tuberculosis control programmes.

57. One component of the humanitarian assistance programme that is also key for opening up opportunities for other assistance activities is the national Mine Action Programme, coordinated by the United Nations. Since the programme's inception, almost 400 square kilometres of mined and battlefield areas have been cleared and a further 55 square kilometres of mined and battlefield areas have been marked and surveyed in preparation for subsequent clearance.

VI. HUMAN RIGHTS

58. The people of Afghanistan have continued to suffer from a massive loss of their human rights throughout this past year. This can be largely attributed to the immediate and accumulated effects of 20 years of war, which continue to take a huge toll in lives, limbs and livelihoods. The devastating impact of the war on all aspects of Afghan society is compounded by a combination of poverty, profound underdevelopment, the absence of representative and accountable governance mechanisms and the marginalization of particular groups, including the severe restrictions imposed on the participation of women and girls in public life. In addition, a pattern of systematic and gross violation of human rights and humanitarian law continues to deprive Afghans of their most fundamental rights.

59. Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Afghanistan, warring parties have not, in general, been troubled by the impact of their activities on civilians. This past year has not, regrettably, seen any discernible change in the willingness of parties to allow civilians to bear the brunt of the suffering. If anything, the situation has become worse for those civilians trapped in front-line areas. There have been repeated instances of deliberate acts of violence against non-combatants. Warfare in the central highlands in April and May involved vicious attacks against civilians, including the summary execution of women and children, forced and involuntary displacement, the looting and burning of homes, arbitrary detention and the use of forced labour. These actions, reportedly carried out by the Taliban forces, were brought to the attention of the authorities in Kandahar by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Kamal Hossain, in a meeting with Mullah Wakil Ahmed on 23 May 1999. However, notwithstanding repeated communication on this issue, the authorities have not yet agreed to a visit to the area by the Special Rapporteur nor taken any significant action on a range of remedial measures proposed by him.

60. Fighting, which erupted at the end of July in the Shomali Plains, was also characterized by the gross and systematic abuse of civilians. Reported violations include the deliberate displacement of civilians, the separation of men from families, summary executions, arbitrary detentions, the abduction and disappearance of women and the burning of homes, property and agricultural assets, including the chopping down of fruit trees and the use of child soldiers. The Taliban forces, who allegedly carried out these acts, essentially treated the civilian population with hostility and made no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Given the brutality of the offensive in the Shomali Plains, many of the displaced persons have expressed great fear about the prospect of returning to their places of origin.

61. A Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan was first appointed by the Commission on Human Rights in 1984. Each year since then, successive Special Rapporteurs have reported a catalogue of abuses that clearly adds to a sense of impunity, particularly within warlord circles and the fighting factions. There are few Afghans who do not attribute the human rights situation in their country to the continuing war, the unceasing flow of arms that helps to sustain it and the brutality of those who conduct it.

62. In my previous reports (A/52/826-S/1998/222, paras. 34-39 and A/53/695-S/1998/1109, para. 54), I referred to extremely serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law reported to have taken place in Afghanistan in 1997 and 1998 and to an investigation of these events to be carried out under the auspices of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The investigation, the progress of which was described in my previous reports (see A/53/1002-S/1999/698, para. 39 and A/54/378-S/1999/954, para. 34), has been completed. A summary of the report on the investigation, submitted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, is being transmitted to the President of the General Assembly for the information of Member States. While the report found that there are clear indications that violations of international humanitarian law and human rights have taken place, it is not possible to fully establish the facts or identify those responsible. Under the circumstances, it would not be feasible to conduct a further investigation of these events.

VII. ILLEGAL DRUGS

63. In 1999, Afghanistan became by far the world's largest illicit producer of opium, with its output reaching up to 75 per cent of all illicit opium worldwide. According to this year's annual poppy survey conducted by the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), opium production is estimated to reach a record level of 4,600 metric tons, which could potentially be converted into 460 metric tons of heroin. In 1999, an estimated 90,983 hectares were under opium poppy cultivation. This represents an increase of 43 per cent over the previous year. Opium poppy cultivation has now spread to 104 districts in Afghanistan, compared to 73 districts in 1998.

64. The first impact of such large increase in the availability of opium and heroin will be felt by Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, as a large proportion of those drugs is expected to remain within the region, especially in countries situated along the trafficking routes to Europe and Asia. The rates of drug abuse in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran have already reached alarming levels and an explosion in drug abuse in the Central Asian countries has been observed over recent years. This will impose additional social, economic and financial costs on the countries concerned.

65. Afghanistan's neighbouring States will have to counter an increasing threat to internal security from cross-border traffic of illicit drugs and associated criminal activity. In the Islamic Republic of Iran alone, 90 soldiers lost their lives in the past year in their fight against illicit drug traffickers and millions of dollars were spent on activities to counter the drug traffic. Border security systems in most countries in the region are underresourced and inadequate to confront illicit drug trafficking on such a massive scale. A recent World Bank study estimated smuggling and other illegal border trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan at US$ 2.5 billion, representing over 12 per cent of Pakistan's gross domestic product. As this trade is expanding, it will have a serious disruptive impact on the economies of all of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries.

66. The value added of drug production for Afghanistan is small compared to the profits that are gained internationally along the drug-traffic chain, but Afghans themselves must bear many direct and indirect costs of this illicit activity. Although no exact figures are available, initial assessments in Afghanistan show that drug abuse is sharply on the rise, mainly as a result of the increased availability of opium and heroin, and of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety resulting from the last 20 years of war. Drug abuse, especially among women and war veterans, has intensified, with little opportunity for the victims to obtain treatment. The drug trade has created new economic dependencies and has formed a small rich class of moneylenders and traders who will make it more difficult for the country to return to normal economic activities.

67. The main thrust of the international community's efforts to counter the drug threat should therefore be to support neighbouring countries in strengthening border controls. Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have agreed with UNDCP to implement border control and law enforcement programmes. UNDCP has approved two regional law enforcement programmes and signed memoranda of understanding with all Central Asian countries to improve coordination among the border control and law enforcement authorities of those countries.

68. The most successful and cost-effective way to intercept illicit drug trafficking is to do so close to its source. In 1998, worldwide drug seizures that involved opium originating from Afghanistan amounted to about 600 metric tons (measured in opium equivalent). Of this total, 519 metric tons, or about 86 per cent, were seized within the region at much lower costs than this could be done in industrialized countries. I therefore urge all Member States to support these programmes to strengthen the borders around Afghanistan.

69. At the same time, it is essential that UNDCP continue to work inside Afghanistan. The United Nations community, under the guidance of UNDCP, will continue to promote the elimination of illicit drug production as one of the three pillars of United Nations humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan. It is also necessary for UNDCP to continue to negotiate with Afghan authorities and communities and to collect information on the extent of illicit drug production and abuse as well as on the motivation of farmers.

VIII. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

70. The conflict in Afghanistan is increasingly having a negative impact beyond the borders of that country. This is an alarming development that has been evident for quite some time. It may be recalled that in my report of 14 November 1997 (A/52/682-S/1997/894), I warned that external players providing military support to the warring factions "must also be held accountable for building a fire which, they should be aware, is unlikely to remain indefinitely confined to Afghanistan". Two years later, there is every indication that the fire has begun to spread in all directions.

71. The details of acute humanitarian and other problems, such as the flood of refugees, reports of ethnically motivated mass killings and the pervasive abuses

of human rights, in particular those of women and girls, are described in the preceding paragraphs of the present report. The sharp rise in the production and trafficking of illegal opium has emerged as another deeply troubling phenomenon.

72. Another factor that has begun to attract the serious attention of the international community is the growing concern that Afghanistan is becoming a breeding ground for religious extremism and sectarian violence, as well as various types of international terrorism, the scope of which far exceeds Afghan boundaries. Security Council resolution 1267 (1999), which imposed sanctions on the Taliban unless an individual implicated in terrorist activities in eastern Africa was turned over within 30 days of the adoption of the resolution, is but one of many terrorism-related symptoms resulting from the situation in Afghanistan.

73. It is significant to note in this context that, in a press conference on 7 October, the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, said that his Government had concrete evidence of the existence of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and that those trained there were involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan. He said that his Government had asked the Taliban to remove these camps. Similar allegations have been made by most of Afghanistan's neighbours and other States beyond its borders.

74. The unpalatable truth of the war in Afghanistan, namely the chronic dependency of the warring factions on foreign military support, endures. Such interference from outside the country remains one of the biggest impediments to peace as it provides the essential means for the continued fighting in the forms of arms, ammunition and other war-making matériel.

75. Equally alarming and unacceptable is the growing presence of thousands of foreign "volunteers", mainly on the side of the Taliban. Those non-Afghan fighters, some still children under the age of 14, come mostly from religious schools in Pakistan. Reports indicate that there are also independent units of Arab and other non-Afghan fighters who are fighting along with Taliban troops, but under separate commands. It is deeply disturbing that an increasing number of non-Afghan fighters are taking part in the actual combat, as well as the planning and logistical support of military offensives.

76. Of equal significance to regional peace and security is the lingering dispute between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban over the killings of diplomats and a journalist at the Iranian Consulate-General in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998. The threat of an open confrontation with the Taliban last autumn necessitated an urgent intervention by the United Nations through my Special Envoy. Although the tension was defused somewhat in October 1998, when the Taliban agreed to release some 50 Iranian truck drivers captured in Mazar-e-Sharif, the issue remains unresolved to date owing to the Taliban's failure to date to apprehend and bring to trial those responsible for the murder.

77. The neighbouring countries of Afghanistan stand to gain the most by a peaceful settlement of the conflict and the most to lose from its continuation. That is why it had been hoped that the establishment of the "Six plus Two" group

would help tackle the Afghanistan issue in a constructive and concrete manner. I regret that this has not, thus far, been the case.

78. I am convinced that the members of this group could do a great deal more to end military support for the Afghan factions from or through their own territories. The group's limited impact, in particular following the Tashkent meeting, has led some to express doubts about the usefulness of its very existence. Nevertheless, I am aware that most members of the group consider that it remains the only viable mechanism and see little merit at present in changing its framework. This being the case, I will continue to work with its members and seek ways of improving its creativity and effectiveness. At the same time, I shall consult other States with influence in Afghanistan on supplementary measures that could be taken in the search for peace.

79. The human and social outlook for Afghanistan remains grim. Next year will be particularly difficult. A significant food deficit is forecast and the shortfall may be compounded by a large number of refugees returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The lack of significant growth in the infrastructure and the economic sector, combined with the poor state of education and health facilities, continues to deserve our urgent attention and help. The United Nations appeal for emergency humanitarian assistance in 2000 has sought to focus on five areas of concern, which, taken together, offer a practical and carefully thought-out vision for building a peace dividend in support of the United Nations comprehensive political efforts.

80. The continued disregard by the belligerents for the life and welfare of civilians and other basic humanitarian norms, despite repeated appeals by the Security Council and the General Assembly, should be condemned in the strongest terms. Various special rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights have also added their voices, basing their observations on their own first-hand visits to Afghanistan and credible testimony received by them.

81. I note with alarm the sharp rise in the illicit production of opium in Afghanistan, a by-product of the continued civil war linked to other issues such as terrorism, arms smuggling and other illicit activities. Unless a political solution is found, there will be little hope that Afghanistan will cease to be the largest global source of the opium/heroin that feeds an extensive international criminal network. I have therefore instructed the Executive Director of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, Pino Arlacchi, to coordinate the response to this growing menace, in close cooperation with the Department of Political Affairs and the Special Mission.

82. Beyond the immense human suffering in Afghanistan, I was deeply saddened at the recent pictures of the statues of the Buddha in Bamyan. The statues have sustained extensive damage by heavy weapons following the Taliban's capture of this central province in September 1998. These acts are not only self-destructive, but have been committed in total disregard of the repeated appeals by Member States and by me for the protection of these historic statues and despite firm assurances to that effect from the Taliban leadership. It will be recalled that the General Assembly, in its resolution A/53/203 A of 18 December 1998, inter alia, called upon all Afghan parties, in particular the

Taliban, to protect the cultural and historic relics and monuments of Afghanistan from acts of vandalism, damage and theft.

83. Following a careful review of recent developments, my Special Envoy and I have reached the conclusion that given the lack of progress achieved so far, his activities should be "frozen" until such time as circumstances change to justify his renewed intervention.

84. The Special Mission, on the other hand, will assume the primary role in conducting United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. It is my intention to appoint a substantive Head of the Mission at the Assistant Secretary-General level, to be assisted by a deputy director and four political affairs officers. The number of military advisers will be reduced from four to two owing to current difficulties experienced in the fulfilment of their monitoring and advisory activities.

85. In order to increase the Organization's political effectiveness, UNSMA will progressively move its head office from Islamabad to Kabul, starting with the stationing of political affairs officers in Kabul and Kandahar. The timing of their deployment will inevitably be determined by the security conditions on the ground. This closer proximity to both belligerents and non-belligerents should afford UNSMA more frequent contact with them. I also intend to proceed with the opening of a sub-office in Tehran in early 2000 so as to increase regular contact with neighbouring States as well as Afghan factions and individuals. Appropriate arrangements will also be made to ensure effective liaison with representatives of Afghan factions in Dushanbe.

86. The new UNSMA Civil Affairs Unit will work inside Afghanistan with the primary objective of promoting respect for minimum humanitarian standards and deterring massive and systematic violations of human rights in the future.

87. The Special Mission will redouble its efforts to bring about a durable and equitable political settlement. It will seek to persuade the two belligerent parties to agree to a ceasefire and resume their dialogue while strengthening its links with Afghan civil society. At the same time, UNSMA will closely monitor and encourage the various peace initiatives of non-United Nations actors, notably from within the Afghan diaspora, while continuing to work closely with the countries that are willing to help find a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict, including those not represented in the "Six plus Two" group.

88. The Afghan factions and the relevant regional powers have yet to demonstrate sufficient political will to find a common approach to the Afghan question. The emerging challenge of ensuring stability in the region and beyond is also not being adequately addressed. The continuing conflict in Afghanistan has reached a point where its regional and international implications can no longer be neglected.

89. I therefore appeal once again to the international community in general, and the Afghan factions and involved neighbouring countries in particular, to redouble their efforts to end the conflict before it becomes uncontrollable. The daunting problems of illegal drugs, the lack of needed humanitarian support,

human rights abuses, religious extremism and terrorism will not simply go away unless and until the international community is awakened to their combined effect on the peace and security in the region and beyond and starts paying full attention to the root cause - the civil war and foreign interference in Afghanistan. The end of military support from outside is an essential prerequisite for the solution of the conflict in Afghanistan. The effectiveness of such a curb depends essentially on the political will of the neighbouring countries, as they control all access to landlocked Afghanistan.

90. I shall continue to keep the General Assembly and the Security Council regularly informed of the situation. I should like to express my deep appreciation for the work of my Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, over the last two years. Through his tireless efforts, he has built a more solid foundation for future peacemaking activities of the United Nations should the Afghan parties find the political will to opt for peace in Afghanistan. I should also like to express my gratitude to the Acting Head of UNSMA, Andrew Tesoriere, and his staff, who continue to carry out their duties under increasingly difficult conditions.